DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 974 SO 020 206

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TITLE Christopher Columbus: The Hero and the Historians.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 22p.; For related document, see SO 020 205.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Biographies; Chronicles; *Economic Change; *North American History; Primary Sources; Resource Materials; *Social Change; *Social History; Western Civilization
IDENTIFIERS *Columbus (Christopher)

ABSTRACT

Social historians are taught that historical changes are caused by large social and economic forces, rather than great individuals; and so they study groups of people, broad economic movements, and underlying institutional structures that change slowly over time. But the general public demands information about the individual person told through historical narrative. Through this method, historians can still raise important and stimulating questions of broad significance. By studying Christopher Columbus as an individual, one can better understand how the United States evolved from the encounter between the Old World and the New and the great social and economic changes that this encounter began. Accurate translations of the documents that were written at the time of the Columbian voyages have not been widely available heretofore, but are presented here in condensed form so that teachers can use the information when interpreting the past to students. If having access to these documents in reliable editions and translations changes the way Columbus is seen as a hero and makes possible new interpretations, then the historical consequences of his enterprise can become a new adventure of discovery. Columbus's youth and early career as a wool entrepreneur are discussed. He traveled in and beyond the Mediterranean and eventually he became an agent of the Spanish monarchy. A discussion of the "Book of Privileges," a collection of royal documents relating to his contracts and negotiations with the monarchy and selected by Columbus himself, is presented at length. A list of seven recommended books written in English and a genealogy of Columbus conclude the document. (JB)

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Christopher Columbus: The Hero and the Historians

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Christopher Columbus: The Hero and the Historians

The historian confronts the hero:

This country, with its great mixture of the old and new, the western and eastern, is the product of a single event in history--the daring enterprise of one man, Christopher Columbus. Surely few individuals in history have had such profound and long-lasting effect on the history of the world. Yet we have two mixed and opposing reactions to Columbus. Instinctively, as ordinary citizens, we recognize him as a hero: his name is known to all schoolchildren in America, and the year 1492 is virtually the only date that most American adults can accurately recall. At the same time, we historians find it hard to justify giving credit to just one person for such momentous consequences. As social scientists, we teach that great change occurs slowly over long stretches of time, not in weeks or months, through the operation of large social and economic forces, not through the efforts of a single person. And so we deny the individual accomplishment. We withhold credit from Christopher Columbus, not by denying that he discovered America, but by denying him as a historic person. We do not see him as a whole man, a son and young apprentice, a husband and father, a member of a large and enterprising merchant community. It is this historic Columbus, the man, that I hope to retrieve here.

I must admit that during most of my life I never thought much about the discovery of America. I can't say that I ever doubted that America existed or that Europeans discovered it; I never took seriously the claim that there could be no discovery because the Indians were already here and knew all about it; nor was I convinced by Edmundo O'Gorman's clever argument that it was not

a discovery until Europeans accepted that it was a new continent rather than a part of Asia.

It was more than just thinking that someone was bound to disocver it sooner or later. No, I subscribed to the most sophisticated historical methodologies. I spent years in graduate school learning to be a professional historian and, if there was one thing that a historian knew, it was that the great man theory was not useful. Great men did not make historical changes: large social and economic forces brought about historical change. I was a committed social scientist. So, I studied groups of people, broad economic movements, underlying institutional structures that changed ever so slowly over time. And so I passed several years thinking, and researching, and writing about these big topics in social and intellectual history that command the attention and respect of other professional historians.

Still, I was called upon quite regularly to talk to community audiences. This happened almost every year when a club or school wanted to have someone come and talk about Christopher Columbus on Columbus Day in October. I am after all a historian of Renaissance Spain, so people just assumed I knew all about Christopher Columbus. Well, I didn't, because it did not seem important to me to know such details about a single peron. I always talked about the "important historical questions" instead.

Then, in 1982, when I was giving another Columbus Day talk, this time to a campus organization, I realized that in just ten years we would have reached 500 years since Columbus discovered America. I was ecstatic. Surely, there would be a great celebration, with fireworks and tall ships and parades, just as there had been in 1976 for the bicentennial of the American Revolution. For the first time in my career, people would not think my subject was some

weird and obscure topic. It would be the subject that everyone would want to know about. Finally, my specialization in the history Renaissance Spain would be relevant.

Not true. No one else was thinking about it. Everyone else wanted to see the past as social science, too, with no time or respect for single events or individual heroes. The U. S. government had no plans to celebrate the discovery. My colleagues in Italian Renaissnce studies just shrugged their shoulders--how could the Columbian discovery compare with the dazzling Italian Renaissance? My friends who work on Spanish HIstory just looked puzzled when I mentioned it. They, too, were serious scholars who thought such things were frivolous. The historians of the United States were simply adamant that the Columbian Discovery had no place in courses on U.S. history. To put it into their course schedules, they would have to take out something else they considered more important. Most daunting of all, however, was the emotional reaction. Most scholars of Indian history considered the Columbian Discovery a tragedy, not something to be celebrated, and this is true whether we are speaking of Indians in the present day United States or in Mexico or Peru or the Caribbean. All of these reactions that I encountered in conversations with other historians have been around for a long time and they have shaped how we study and teach about the earliest written history of our nation. Even though we recognize the validity of these intellectual approaches, and even if we agree with all of these politically motivated interpretations, we need to respond to the public demand for understanding our national roots.

The public demand is for the individual person and the narrative story. The ordinary citizen understands intuitively that the Columbian discovery was

the same mixture of brilliance and befuddlement that makes up every crucial event in history. Through the people and the narrative, we can raise important and stimulating questions of broad significance: how does the individual fit into historical change, and what responsibility do individuals carry for the unforeseen consequences of their actions?

The more we know and understand the man Christopher Columbus himself, the more we can understand how this nation evolved from th eencounter between the Old World and the New, and the great social and economic changes that historic encounter set into motion. But in order to know the man and the story, and then to debate the consequences, we must have accurate information. And that information must come from trustworthy documents. For Columbus, the documents are abundant, but the editions and translations have not been trustworthy.

Accurate editions of the contracts between Columbus and Ferdinand and Isabella have never been readily available to historians, let alone to the general public. By distributing these translations to you, the teachers who are actually on the front lines of interpreting the past to students, I hope to discover if the texts themselves, the narratives as they were written down at the time of the discovery, will make a difference. If having access to these documents in reliable editions and translations changes the way we see Columbus as a hero and the makes possible new interpretations, then the historical consequences of his enterprise can themselves become a new adventure of discovery.

The most influential aspects of Columbus's person on the future development of world history were the most basic. First, his birth, apprenticehip, and citizenship in the Republic of Genoa, one of the world's

great international commercial empires. Second, his marriage in Portugal and trading career in the Portuguese Atlantic islands and African colonies. And third, his career as an agent of the Spanish monarchy, exploring, settling, and conquering the New World on the pattern of Spanish society. Columbus thus embodied three of the most dynamic expressions of Renaissance Europe: Italian wool entrepreneurship in the Mediterranean, Portuguese commerical initiative in the Atlantic, and Spanish expansion to new lands. Here, I would like to focus on the first and the last, on Christopher Columbus as a Genoese wool merchant and on Christopher Columbus as a representative of the Spanish monarchy.

Young Columbus:

We know a great deal about the family and early years of Christopher Columbus. In fact, we have more documentary evidence for his youth than we do for the childhood of George Washington. From parish registers, the records of the wool guild in the city of Genoa, and notarized contracts for marriage settlements, wills, and property sales, we can see Christopher Columbus in the context of his parents, his brothers and sisters as they married and went into business, and his own early career as a wool entrepreneur. From these records, we know that Christopher Columbus was born in the city of Genoa between August 25 and October 31, 1451. His father was a member of the wool guild, the lana, and therefore was involved in the business of buying raw wool, having it manufactured into cloth, and then marketing it throughout the European commercial world.

This means that Christopher Columbus was part of the most important and cosmopolitan economic activity of Europe in his age. Apart from agriculture,

the manufacture and sale of wool cloth was the biggest sector of the European economy in the age of Columbus. More people made their living in textile manufacture and marketing than any other industry. Construction, the next largest sector of the economy, was a distant third in numbers of workers and volume of transactions. The wool guild, the lana, was the most powerful industrial group in every Italian city-state, controlling the political offices and the commercial life of the city.

The members of the lana were commercial entrepreneurs, not weavers themselves. They bought the raw wool and subcontracted it to wool washers, carders, spinners, and weavers in the countryside to be made into wool cloth. The most successful members of the lana accumulated enough capital to go beyond this putting-out stage and become dealers in finished bolts of cloth on the international market. Christopher Columbus himself tells us that he spent years engaged in this wool trade, buying bolts of wool cloth in Genoa, trading them by ship to the eastern Mediterranean, to southern Italy, to the north African coast, and to the ports of Barcelona, Valencia, and Seville in the Western Mediterranean. He was, in short, a buyer and seller of cloth and other merchandise in an age when this was the most lucrative and prestigious economic occupation of Europe.

It was in the pursuit of merchandise and profit that Columbus expanded his travels beyond the Mediterranean. As he himself tells us, he traded in the Atlantic ports of Portugal, England, the Madeiras Islands, and northern Spain. By 1576, he had been at sea as a traveling merchant for most of his young life, and he had acquired enough status and resources to be eligible for a good marriage.

Columbus had the good fortune to make a marriage in Portugal, the most

dynamically expanding commercial nation in the Atlantic. Sometime before 1485, he married dona Felipa Monis de Perestrello, daughter of the first proprietary captain of the island of Port Santo in the Madeiras. Through marriage to a Portuguese woman, he acquired some of the rights of Portuguese citizenship. These included the right to engage in Portugal's new trade in merchandise and slaves in trading posts on the islands off the coast of Africa.

Columbus's years of experience as an Italian wool merchant and his participation in the Portuguese sea trade with Africa were experiences that shaped his mentality, his ambitions, and his negotiations with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. He would try to acquire from the Spanish monarchs what his Portuguese in-laws had acquired from the Portuguese king.

Columbus as an agent of the Spanish monarchy:

From 1485 to 1492, Christopher Columbus traveled to Spanish ports and commercial cities several times. Recent research by Spanish historians has brought to light contracts between Columbus and other Genoese merchants, forming short-term partnerships in the cities of Seville and Cordoba. We used to think that Columbus came to Spain and just stayed there, living off of the generosity of some monks on the coast, but that idea has now been shown to be fiction. Instead, Columbus was traveling from one market and one port to another, probably still engaged in the African trade, and seeing his wife and small children several times a year.

Throughout these seven years of travel in and out of Spain, Columbus was

trying to get an interview with the king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella. He wanted to propose a contract similar to the one that his Portuguese in-laws had for the island of Porto Santo. That would give him the right to establish trading posts on any islands he might discover by sailing west across the Atlantic to the Indies. Apparently, he thought there would be islands all across the ocean that he could use for provisioning and trading on the way to the great commercial markets of China and Japan. The contract he finally negotiated with Ferdinand and Isabella, the famous Capitulaciones de Santa Fe, in April, 1492, provided for just this sort of arrangement. Columbus was to have propietary command of trading posts and the right to invest in and take profits from all commercial activities in the islands he might discover.

As we know, however, things did not turn out exactly the way expected. Adjustments had to be made. And both Christopher Columbus and the Spanish monarchs struggled for years to renegogiate the terms under which the original contract could be satisfied and, at the same time, the unanticipated results of the discovery could be incorporated into the Spanish way of life. The conflict between these two objectives became the dominant theme of Columbus's later life.

For the New World, these contradictions and their resolution would become crucial. The genius of the Spanish monarchs was displayed in working out the problems, resolving the contradictions, and adapting to local conditions in the Caribbean. All of these were worked out over a period of ten years, between 1492 and 1502, in new contracts, letters, and agreements between Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus collected all these contracts into a single set of documents, the Book of Royal Privileges, which are the best source of information about what Columbus, Ferdinand, and

Isabella intended to achieve in the New World, how they had to compromise in the face of New World realities, and how the interests of natives and colonists were subordinated to the those of Columbus and the monarchs.

Reinterpreting the history of the hero:

Scholars interested in Christopher Columbus, in the colonies he and his successors established in the New World, in the society that supported and then imprisoned him, in the explorers who imitated him, must consider the documents that Columbus believed defined his status as the admiral of a new world living in an old world. Columbus regarded the Book of Privileges as the most important document he could leave to posterity: he himself selected the royal documents to be included in the collection, commissioned several notarized copies of the collection, sent two copies to his associates in Genoa and deposited two more for safekeeping in Spain. One of those copies, made in Seville in 1502, was purchased by the Library of Congress at the beginning of the twentieth century. This document, known as the Washington Codex, may be the only artifact in the United States that Christopher Columbus actually held in his hands.

The Book of Privileges is the legal foundation upon which the colonization of both North and South America rested. The royal documents instructed Columbus to colonize the New World and authorized him to establish a system of governance that would both assure an orderly and productive

replica of the Castilian homeland and attract the native Indians to the Christian faith. At the time, these objectives were not seen to be inherently contradictory nor inappropriate for the Americas. Almost immediately, however, tensions and conflicts erupted out of the volatile mixture of the monarchs' intentions expressed in the Book of Privileges, Columbus's commercial objectives, and the self-interests of native Indians and Spanish colonists. From 1498 on, most parties to the conflicts tried to justify and explain their own actions: Columbus in his letters, memoranda, and Book of Prophesies; Bartolomé de las Casas on behalf of the Indians; Oviedo from the perspective of the Spanish colonists and officals; Andrés Bernáldez and Ferdinand Columbus in defense of the Admiral.

The royal documents granting the discoverer governing powers and a share of the trade in the New World shaped the success and failure of Columbus's career in Spain and defined the profit he and his successors would receive from the New World. During Columbus's lifetime and for 250 years after his death, the wording, intentions, and precedents of the documents in the Book of Privileges were the subjects of litigation brought by the Spanish monarchs, the Columbus family and its descendants, and Columbus's pilots, navigators, rivals, and imitators.

The Book of Privileges contains documents ranging chronologically from a grant issued in 1405 by King John II appointing Alfonso Enríquez as admiral of Castile to notarial certificates of the authenticity and accuracy of the copies Columbus commissioned in 1502. The most widely known documents in the collection are the Agreement of April 17, 1492, between Columbus and King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and the Bull of Demarcation of 1493.

The texts were collected and copied in two stages. Shortly before his

third voyage in 1498, Columbus commissioned notaries in the city of Seville to make copies of about 35 royal documents. These documents are of two types: warrants and commissions from 1492 through 1494 appointing him admiral and governor of the Indies, and contracts, pay vouchers, and instructions dated 1497 preparatory to the third voyage. Columbus carried one copy, the Veragua Codex, completed in March, 1498, with him on the third voyage. (The fate of the other 1498 copies is unknown.)

In the city of Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola, the admiral commissioned notarized copies of several royal documents that he had brought with him but had not included in the Veragua Codex. His purpose may have been to leave one copy in the city of Santo Domingo with his lieutenant governor, his brother Bartolomew, while the admiral himself toured the island to impose order on the colonists who had rebelled against Bartolomew's administration during Columbus's absence in Spain.

Back in Spain, Columbus was indicted on charges of irregularities in his administration of justice on Hispaniola. The courts exonerated him, but the monarchs stripped him of his offices as viceroy and governor general of the Indies while authorizing other captains to make exploratory voyages. Columbus, before his fourth voyage in 1502, commissioned four more copies, adding about 10 items. The new additions include a royal mandate ordering restitution of his property, and legal opinions as to Columbus's rights to a share of the royal revenues from the Indies and his rights and privileges as admiral.

The Seville notaries finished copying this full set of about 45 documents on March 22, 1502. Columbus sent two parchment copies of this set, bound and cased, to Genoa (Codices Genoa and Paris) and deposited a third in the

monastery of Las Cuevas near Seville, along with the original documents (not extant). The fate and location of the third and fourth codices are not known, but it is assumed that the Providence Codex may be the remnants of one and the Washington Codex may be the other. The Genoa and Paris Codices have different covering letters and supplementary materials because, although Columbus sent them to the same person in Genoa, he entrusted them to separate carriers who departed from Seville about a month apart. Most of these codices remained safe but unused in their Italian and Spanish depositories.

The Veragua Codex, however, belonged to Columbus's son Diego Colon and became a living document, the focus of nearly three centuries of litigation between the Castilian monarchy and Columbus's descendants, the dukes of Veragua. As the claims and counterclaims followed one another with conflicting interpretations of portions of the Book of Privileges, the courts admitted evidence from an ever widening range of eyewitnesses and experts to define ever smaller segments of the text.

The development emerged as early as 1512 in the first two lawsuits. Diego Colon entered the Veragua Codex as evidence in the lawsuit he brought against the monarchy to claim the revenues and offices granted to his father in 1492. The courts ruled in Diego's favor in 1511, restoring the title of viceroy and granting the full revenues and powers of the 1492 contract.

The monarchy initiated a countersuit settled in its favor in 1512, arguing that Columbus's grant extended only to those places he discovered himself. This argument was based on a strict reading of the 1492 contract and on the claims of eight captains who carried out authorized voyages of discovery between 1499 and 1503.

This lawsuit is of particular interest to scholars because it contains

depositions by participants in all the authorized voyages of discovery between 1499 and 1503. The eyewitness descriptions of flora, fauna, people, topography, equipment, and navigation are an invaluable source of information for natural scientists, geographers, cartographers, and ethnographers.

We must keep in mind, however, that these accounts are self-interested, the witnesses attempting to claim discoveries in order to preserve for themselves a share of the revenues and positions granted in their royal authorizations. They were well aware that their own royal concessions were modeled on the monarchs' 1492 agreement with Columbus and that their rewards would depend on the court's interpretation of the Veragua Codex.

Scholars studying the Columbus litigation and the colonization of the New World require an understanding of the terminology in the Veragua Codex. The translations of the Book of Privileges currently available cannot provide this understanding, even to those fluent in Spanish. The two printed English translations, both published in the nineteenth century, are antiquated and inaccurate.

The anonymous 1823 translation of the Genoa Codex is riddled with Italianisms and inexplicably confuses the names of a few, key monarchs of the early fifteenth century. The fact that this quaint translation is not readily available is a blessing.

The 1893 translation of the Paris Codex was published before the discovery of the Washington Codex (1901), and before scholars identified the Veragua Codex (1951). Nevertheless, the 1893 publication closely supervised by Benjamin Franklin Stevens is a superb example of the book publisher's art. The quality of the paper, printing, and binding make it a jewel in the

collections of rare book libraries. The American bibliographer and Hispanist Henry Harrisse wrote a lucid and intelligent introduction. Photoreproductions of the Codex are matched page for page by George F. Barwick's transliteration and his translation into the English legalese of 1893. The archaic flavor of Barwick's English is not a serious obstacle for modern scholars, but the translation is careless and inept.

Some of Barwick's most obvious errors are the result of simple carelessness. The year 1496 in his transcription, for example, is rendered as 1497 in his translation. Some of his inaccuracies can be attributed to defects in the manuscript he was working with. In one place, for example, his translation is garbled because the word declaradas is missing in the Paris Codex. Some lapses in Barwick's translation reveal his unfamiliarity with the documents of fifteenth-century Castile. For example, he fails to translate continuo, as if its meaning were obscure, although this word regularly appears in pay vouchers of the period. Most of the inaccuracies in the 1893 translation, however, seem to be the result of using modern definitions for fifteenth-century terms. The word labrador before the modern period meant 'farmer,' or specifically a farmer who owned one or more plow teams. Barwick translates it as 'laborer,' the preferred meaning given in modern dictionaries, and consequently he gives a false impression of the people Columbus brought on the third voyage to colonize Hispaniola. Another type of error in Barwick's translation arises from his excessive consistency. A Spanish word with several meanings, such as oficio, can mean 'office,' 'occupation,' or 'craft,' depending on its context. Barwick ignores these variations and thus distorts the factual content of the documents. These errors can readily be corrected by a competent translator familiar with the

language, documents, and society of fifteenth-century Castile.

There are serious historical problems in translating the Book of Privileges. The first is the same one that the Spanish law courts took years to untangle--the meaning, intent, and precedents of the Spanish original. The documents span one of the most turbulent and innovative periods in the history of the Castilian monarchy, and the secretaries who composed and dictated them were innovating--inventing, borrowing, and adapting terminology and concepts to fit bewilderingly rapid changes in the structure and needs of the royal government. Some of the titles and offices that Ferdinand and Isabella granted to Columbus, for example, were their own creations: the first Castilian hereditary title of duke was granted in 1475, the first governor general appointed in 1484, and the first captain general in 1492. The nineteenth century translations do not incorporate the changing formularies of the fifteenth century: Barwick's translation of legal terms is meticulously--and therefore incorrectly--consistent from the first document in 1405 to the last in 1502.

The second problem is also historical. In 1492, Ferdinand, Isabella, and Columbus all assumed that they were negotiating terms for a relatively familiar world, Asia, made up of large cities and centralized empires and monarchies. The monarchs authorized Columbus to negotiate with the rulers he would encounter and named him their viceroy and governor general of lands he would discover en route that were not under the jurisdiction of other rulers. The jolting realization that this was not Asia and that all of what Columbus had found might become theirs begins to appear in the 1497 documents and becomes clear in those added to the 1502 codices. This changing perception on the part of the monarchs is masked and flattened by Barwick's consistency

and will require careful attention to subtle changes in word selection and emphases.

In appearance, the Book of Privileges was only a business contract defining Columbus's relationship with Ferdinand and Isabella, but today, in reality, we can see that it shaped the Encounter by defining the New World's relationships with the Castilian government. Columbus's years of residence in Spain, his career in the service of the Castilian monarchy, the inherent ambiguities of his position as a foreigner in the service of the Castilian monarchy. Ferdinand and Isabella's burst of enthusiastic gratitude after the first voyage and then gradual loss of confidence in the Admiral's governing abilities. The legal interpretations of the Book of Privileges during the lawsuit became the government's norms for the settlement and commercial life of the New World, and were transformed in America by the practical realities of the encounter between Spanish colonists and native cultures.

Christopher Columbus stamped his private and public world on this country. His understanding of how societies and economies should work shaped the first contract with Ferdinand and Isabella. His personality chose the people who would go with him on the first voyage, and return with him on the second and third and fourth voyages to settle the Caribbean Islands and then the American mainland. His descendants inherited the offices and wealth that Columbus gained through his canny bargaining, and governed the new colonies in fact and in name for generations. Most important of all, Columbus's background as a citizen of the Republic of Genoa, as a merchant in Portugal, and as an entrepreneur sailing under contract with the king and queen of Castile shaped his reports about the discovery. We are still living in hopes

of fulfilling the expectations of Christopher Columbus and, like him, we are still struggling to get the documents right.

List of Recommended Books in English

Christian, William A. Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

Floyd, Troy S. The Columbus Dynasty in the Caribbean, 1492-1526 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973).

McAlister, Lyle N. Spain & Portugal in the New World, 1492-1700 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

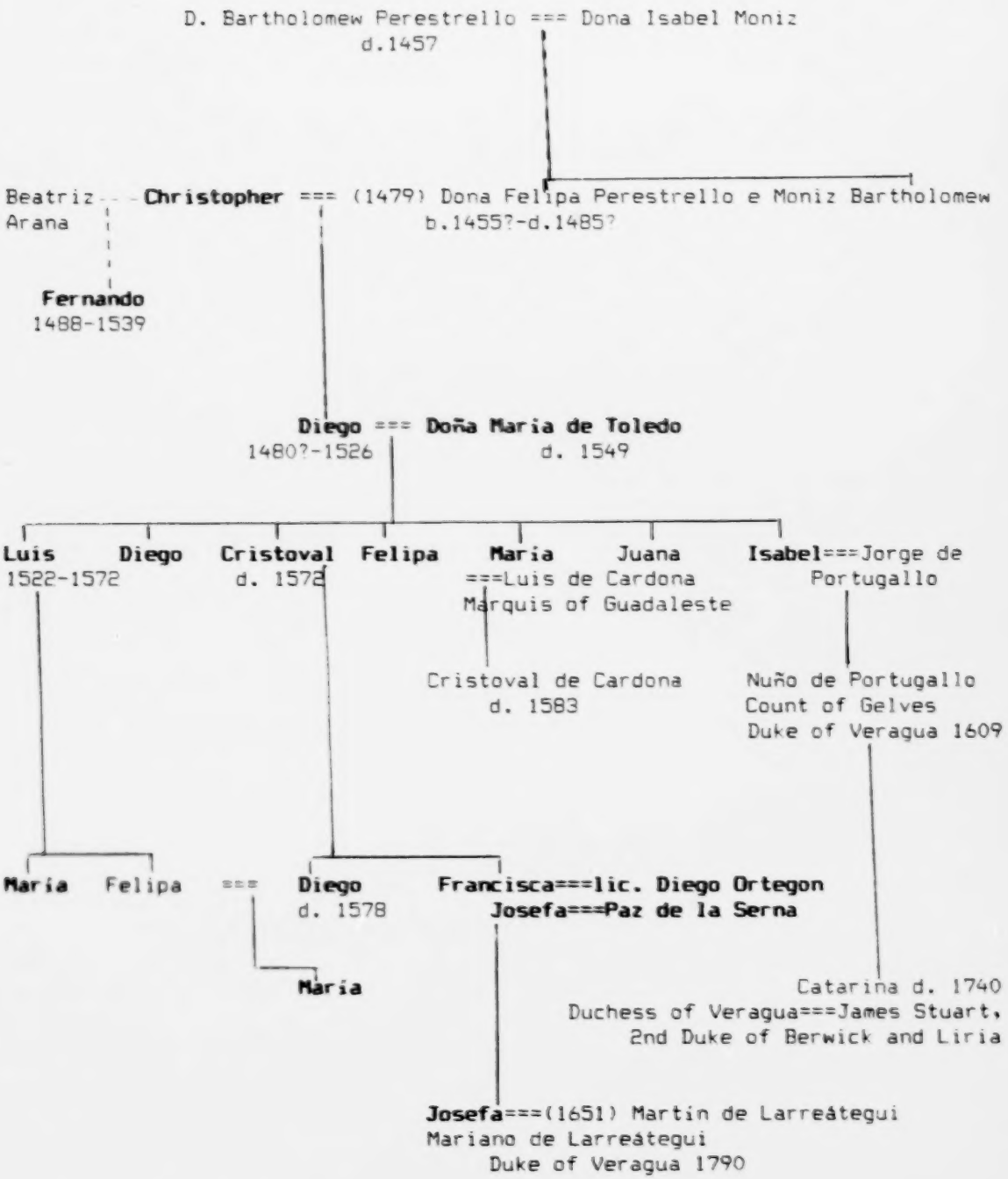
Parry, J. H. The Age of Reconaissance (New York: Mentor Books, 1964).

Phillips, Carla Rahn Six Galleons for the King of Spain: Imperial Defense in the Early Seventeenth Century (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

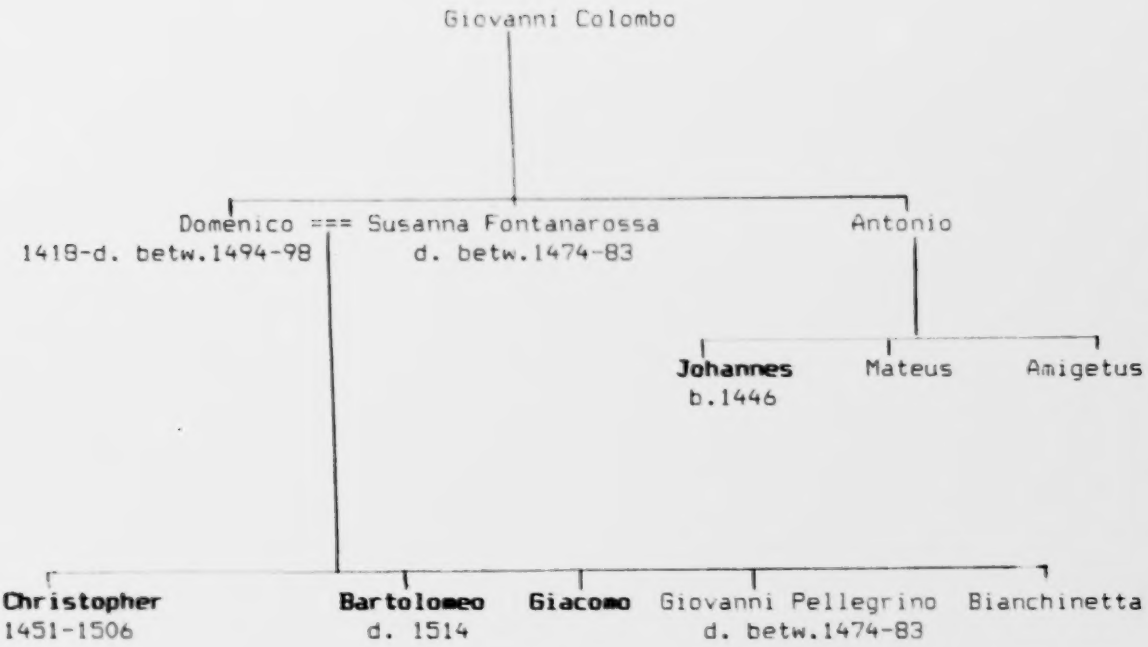
Phillips, William D. Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

Super, John C. Food, Conquest and Colonization in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988).

DESCENDANTS OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS



FAMILY TREE OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS



Bold face = lived or traveled in the New World